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ABSTRACT

Two studies were conducted dealing with death and grief in a college student population. In the first study three separate surveys were conducted with undergraduates (N=557) enrolled in an introductory course on human development. In the second study in-depth interviews with undergraduates (N=18) bereaved over the death of a family member or a friend were conducted. Topics covered in the survey included the meaning of death, attitudes toward religion and toward death, personal thoughts about their own deaths, deaths of family members, and deaths of friends. A surprisingly high percentage of the students reported a recent death of a family member or of a friend. Topics covered in the interview included reminiscing about the death, avoiding reminders, emotions, expectations of grief recovery, and means used to cope. Limitations of the studies include too few students to produce group contrasts and further differences that do emerge could just as well be the result of a skewed sample. A call is made for longitudinal research to study the trajectory of grief. (Author/ABL)

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The Many Faces of Bereavement on the College Campus

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A paper presented as part of a symposium The Many Faces of Bereavement: Counseling and Research conducted at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, Boston, August 14, 1990.

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RUNNING HEAD: Many Faces of Bereavement

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ABSTRACT

The author reports on two studies dealing with death and grief in a college student population: (a) three separate surveys conducted with undergraduates enrolled in an introductory course on human development and (b) in-depth interviews with undergraduates bereaved over the death of a family member or a friend. Topics covered in the survey were the meaning of death, attitudes toward religion and toward death, personal thoughts about their own deaths, deaths of family members, and deaths of friends. A surprisingly high percentage of the students reported a recent death of a family member or of a friend. Topics covered in the interview included reminiscing about the death, avoiding reminders, emotions, expectations of grief recovery, and means used to cope. Limitations of the studies are discussed as well as some bereavement patterns that seem consistent with findings from other researchers. Some attention is paid to the students' perceptions that professionals were of no help to them whereas religion and other private practices such as crying and talking about the death were. A call is made for longitudinal research to study the trajectory of grief.

The Many Faces of Bereavement

on the College Campus

LaGrand (1981, 1986) has demonstrated that college students are not strangers to significant losses in their lives, particularly to the deaths of family members and of friends. Wrenn (1989) noted that estimates of deaths on United States campuses range from 4 to 15 per 10,000 students; these figures suggest student deaths annually range from 5,000 to 18,750. Some universities have begun systematic efforts to assist bereaved college students (Rickgarn, 1987). However, despite some papers on the experiences of grief on college campuses (Floerchinger, in press; Zinner, 1985), we cannot claim to know much about the bereavement phenomena experienced by college students. A recent paper (Vickio, Cavanaugh, & Attig, 1990) reports that undergraduates possess "substantial awareness of the various factors of the grief process" and seem sensitive to the needs of grieving peers.

The popularity on several university campuses of courses on death and dying and on coping with life crises accents the fact that many undergraduates struggle with resolving death in their lives. Over the last few years one of the author's colleagues estimates that at least ten percent of the undergraduates she has taught mentioned that fear of death is particularly prominent for them (Joan N. McNeil, personal communication); in the case of the author, many students have discussed at length on-going struggles to resolve the deaths of friends or family members.

Clinical and counseling professionals on the Kansas State University campus indicate that unresolved bereavement forms a paramount issue in the problem situations of a significant proportion of students who seek professional help (Donald P. Fallon, May 25, 1988, personal communication; Fred B. Newton, February 20, 1989, personal communication; Marc T. Wilander, May 24, 1988, personal communication). Finally, over a three semester span during the 1987-88 academic year, at least 91 students struggling with the deaths of family members or of friends came to the attention of the Dean of Student Life on the Kansas State University campus (Caroline F. Peine, January 18, 1989, personal communication).

These details form the background for two separate studies: (a) a series of surveys a colleague and I conducted with undergraduates enrolled in a one semester course entitled "Introduction to Human Development." This course serves the entire campus, draws students from a wide variety of majors and colleges, and consistently has been identified by students as one of the more popular academic offerings in their programs of studies; and (b) in-depth interviews with undergraduates regarding their experience of grieving the death of a family member or a friend.

Method

The First Study

Over a period of three semesters, students enrolled in Introduction to Human Development were surveyed about several aspects pertinent to personal experiences with death. The survey instrument gathered demographic information; items were asked regarding religiosity, the meaning of death for the students, the role religion played in the development of their attitudes toward death, and the extent to which students agreed with some general statements about death (for instance, "I would avoid a friend who was dying" and "I am disturbed by the shortness of life"). Students were asked whether someone in their families had died, who had died, when the most recent death had occurred, age of the person who had died, cause of the death, whether the student had attended the funeral, persons with whom the student had talked about the death, and how helpful discussing the death had proven. The same questions were asked if the student indicated a friend had died; in addition, the student was asked how close the relationship had been with the friend.

Sample

A total of 557 students out of a total enrollment of 812 (68.5%) completed the survey instrument. The average age of the respondents was 20.7, with a median and a mode of 20.0. Females

comprised 80% of the sample. Ethnic/racial composition was 94.5% White, 2.7% Black, 1.4% Hispanic, and 1.2% Other. Data were missing on one respondent. The religious background of the respondents was Protestant (59.1%), Catholic (32.5%), Jewish (0.2%), agnostic (0.2%), and Other (7.0%). Data were missing on six respondents.

Results

Meaning of Death

Over 38% said death means for them "the beginning of a life after death -- a transition or new beginning." For 33.8% death means "termination of this life but survival of the spirit." None of the other choices was selected by even 8% of the respondents. The complete presentation of these data are provided in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 Here

Attitudes toward Religion and Attitudes toward Death

Nearly two-thirds of the students said they were either very religious (9.5%) or moderately religious (54.9%). About one-third (31.2%) indicated they were slightly religious. The remainder (4.1%) said they were not at all religious. None of the students said he or she was anti-religious. One person did not complete the item.

Nearly two-thirds of the respondents (64.8%) indicated religion had played a significant role in the development of their attitudes toward death. Slightly less than one-fourth

(23.7%) said religion had been somewhat influential but had not played a major role. One-eighth (12.5%) said religion played a relatively minor role if at all. One person did not answer the item.

A plurality (44.5%) indicated strong belief in a life after death, and one-fourth (25.1%) said they tended to believe in life after death. Over one-fifth (22.3%) expressed uncertainty, 6.6% doubted there is a life after death, and 1.4% expressed conviction that there is no life after death.

Over three-fourths (75.6%) of the students indicated a strong wish for life after death. Of the remaining respondents, 22.1% expressed indifference, 2% preferred there not be a life after death, and 0.4% (n = 2) did not answer the item.

Personal Thoughts about Own Death

The majority of persons (61.4%) at least occasionally thought about their own deaths. Some said they frequently (12.2%) or very frequently (1.3%) thought about their own deaths. Nearly one-fifth (19.4%) only rarely thought about the matter, and a few students (5.6%) said they never thought about it. These data are presented in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 Here

The students were asked how they felt when they thought about their own deaths (or when circumstances made them realize their own mortality). The two more common responses were pleasure in being alive (36.3%) and feeling fearful (28.4%).

Other responses included depressed (8.3%), resolved in relation to life (8.1%), discouraged (3.2%), and purposeless (2.3%). When the students' responses are grouped according to positive and negative affect, 44.4% can be seen to have selected more positive sounding reactions, whereas the majority chose more clearly sounding negative reactions. Several persons (11.7%) gave one of a kind answers such as the following selected at random: "Questioning, wondering what will happen afterwards", "Excited, it will be much better than this life," "I know life in heaven will be better than life now," "I am scared I will die a sudden death, but I am not afraid to die," and "Sometimes fearful but sometimes longing for the peace." Ten persons (1.8%) did not answer the item.

General Statements about Death

On a five-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), the students were asked the extent of their agreement with eight general statements about death. The statements covered such topics as avoiding a friend who was dying, never getting over the death of someone close, and feeling disturbed by the shortness of life.

The great majority of the students (76.8%) strongly disagreed that they would avoid a dying friend. A higher proportion (82.2%) strongly agreed that they would experience a great loss if someone close died. Although no clear pattern emerged regarding feeling speechless with a friend who was dying

(32.5% disagreed or strongly disagreed, 23% expressed uncertainty, and 44% agreed or strongly agreed they would feel speechless), students who had lost a friend to death were significantly less likely than the other students to indicate they would be speechless with a dying friend, F (1,526) = 8.25, $p < .005$.

Mixed responses were given regarding feeling anxious in the presence of someone who is dying (28.7% disagreed or strongly disagreed that they would feel anxious, 33.8% expressed uncertainty, and 37.4% agreed or strongly agreed). A majority (52.2%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that they would never get over the death of someone close, 14.2% was undecided, and 33.4% agreed or strongly agreed.

Nearly one-half (47.6%) agreed or strongly agreed that death was seldom mentioned at home when they were growing up, 43.6% indicated that death was discussed, and 8.6% was not certain; however, students who had NOT experienced a family death (n = 97) indicated the topic of death was seldom mentioned while they were growing up, in significant contrast to what the other students reported, F (1, 541) = 5.61, $p < .02$.

Nearly four-fifths of the students (79.2%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that they have very little control over what happens in their lives, with 9% expressing uncertainty, and 11.7% expressing agreement or strong agreement. A majority (52.4%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement "I am

disturbed by the shortness of life"; 22.8 was uncertain, and 24.6% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement.

Deaths in Their Families

Most students (n = 447, 80.3%) indicated a family death had occurred, but only a few of the students reported that someone in their immediate family had died. Over two-thirds had lost one or more grandparents, and more than one-fourth had lost another relative (for instance, cousins, uncles, aunts). Multiple deaths were reported by 124 of the students: 109 reported two deaths, 12 reported three deaths, and three reported four deaths. The data regarding deaths in families are provided in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 Here

The average span of time since the most recent family death was 4.7 years. Over one-fourth of the students (27.4%) reported a family death had occurred within the past year, and over two-fifths (44.7%) reported a family death within the past 24 months. The median time since the most recent family death was three years.

On the average the students were 16 years old when the most recent death occurred. Given the fact that the bulk of family deaths involved grandparents, it is not surprising that the average age of the family member who had died was 65.6 years old.

The primary cause of death was illness, in many cases what the students called "old age" (83.4%); accidents accounted for 9.9% of the deaths, suicide for 1.1%, and murder for 0.9%. The

students did not know the cause of death in 4.7% of the cases. Nearly all of the students (85.4%) had attended the funeral of their deceased family member.

Most of the students talked to their mothers about the death. In descending order, the persons with whom the students discussed their family deaths were: mother (82.7%), father (58.4%), close friend (57.5%), sister (40.7%), brother (38.2%), other persons (for instance, an aunt or uncle or grandparent) (29.3%), minister (9.2%), and counselor (4.9%). Only 30 of the 447 students (6.7%) who had experienced a family death said they had not talked to any one about the death.

Talking about the death was considered very helpful (43.8%) or somewhat helpful (41.2%) by most of the students; 14.4% found talking was neutral. For three persons (0.7%) talking about the death was not helpful.

Deaths of Friends

Sixty percent (n = 334) reported a friend had died, and for the majority of these persons they considered the individual to have been a close or even a very close friend. The average length of time since the friend's death was 2.5 years, and the median time two years. In 43.7% of the cases the deaths had occurred within the past year, and in nearly two-thirds of the cases (64.8%), students reported a friend's death had occurred in the past two years.

On the average students were 18 years old at the time of their friend's death. The average age of the friend who died was 20.

Nearly two-thirds (65.5%) of the deaths had been caused by accidents (primarily automobile accidents); 16.8% were the result of an illness (primarily cancer), 8.7% were suicides, and 6.6% were murders. The students did not know the cause of death for 2.4% of the individuals who had died. Two-thirds (67.3%) attended the funeral.

Only 4.2% (n = 14) said they had not talked to anybody about their friend's death. The persons most favored for discussions of a friend's death were other friends (87.1%). In descending order, the other persons with whom the students had discussed their friends' deaths were: mothers (61.4%), fathers (35.2%), sisters (23.1%), brothers (20.1%), other persons such as the friend's parents (18.6%), counselors (9.0%), and ministers (6.0%). Table 4 shows a comparison of the persons with whom the students discussed family members' and friends' deaths.

Insert Table 4 Here

Talking about the death of their friends proved very helpful for 37.2% of the students. For another 46.7% talking about the death was at least somewhat helpful. A small minority of respondents (14.9%) said discussing the death had proven neutral

("neither helpful nor unhelpful"), and for 1.2% discussing the death was said to have been "not at all helpful".

The Second Study

Eighteen students who indicated they were grieving a death agreed to participate in an in-depth interview about their bereavement.[1] This study is exploratory and represents the start of some longitudinal investigations into grief recovery on a college campus. Topics covered in the interview included reminiscing about the dead person, avoiding reminders of the deceased, emotions linked to the death, expectations about grief recovery, and means used to cope. The students were asked to respond to questions in terms of how they had reacted in the past month. Nearly all of the items were scaled on a 1 to 5 scale (Never to Almost All the Time) or on a 1 to 4 scale (Not at All to Very Much). Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes.

Twenty-one items investigated reminiscing about the person who had died. Topics included talking about the person, remembering shared activities, being reminded by everyday places, thinking about things the deceased never did and about things he/she would never do, picturing the deceased in one's mind, trying to recall his/her voice, thinking about the way the person had died, thinking about the last time they had seen the person alive, and thinking about good times shared with the person.

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[1]The instrument was developed by the Research Consortium on Adolescent Bereavement sponsored by the William T. Grant Foundation.

Five items investigated behaviors used to avoid reminders of the deceased. Topics included keeping oneself from thinking and from talking about the deceased, avoiding places that bring back memories of the deceased, and avoiding doing things that provide reminders.

Seven emotions were investigated. These emotions were sadness, anger, fear, guilt, comfort, confidence, and loneliness.

Nine items investigated expectations about what grief recovery would entail for the interviewees: three items about personal expectations, three about friends' expectations, and three about family members' expectations.

Fifteen items investigated various means used to cope with one's grief and whether each practice was helpful, distressing, both helpful and distressing, or neither. Topics investigated included such coping efforts as crying, talking about the death, remembering good points about the deceased, not thinking about the person, honoring the person on special occasions, working on grief by oneself, focusing on other things, reading, keeping belongings of the deceased, rationalizing about the death, participating in self-help groups, engaging in religious practices, keeping busy, consulting professional help, and taking prescribed medication.

Sample

The students ranged in age from 16 to 47, with a modal age of 20 and an average age of 24.3. Fourteen of the 18 students

were female, fifteen were White and three were Black, and thirteen described themselves as Protestant and five as Catholic. Most of the students were in their junior year of college. The length of time since the death ranged from three months to more than six years, with an average length of time of around four years; however, ten of the interviewees (55.6%) were in their first year of bereavement, none was in the second year, and the remaining eight were in at least the third year. Two students were grieving the death of a mother, four the death of a father, one the death of a brother, seven the death of another family member, and four the death of a friend. Ten of the 18 deaths had occurred due to illness, five to accidents, and three to homicides. In two-thirds of the cases, the students had not expected the death to occur.

Results

Reminiscing about the Deceased

Over 60% (n = 11) said that in the past month they had talked about the person at least some of the time. Nearly 80% (n = 14) had remembered things done with the person who had died. Less than half (n = 8) said everyday places had reminded them of the dead person; however, most persons (n = 16) indicated the person who had died had not lived in the town where Kansas State University is located. Two-thirds (n = 12) thought sometimes to almost all the time about things the deceased would never get to do, and nearly 80% (n = 14) thought about things the person never

did. Over half (n = 10) pictured the dead person in their minds sometimes to almost all the time, and slightly less than half (n = 7) tried to recall the person's voice. Half (n = 9) thought often or almost all the time about how the person had died, and more than half (n = 10) thought about the last time they had seen the person alive. Nine thought often or almost all the time about good times shared with the person who had died. In summary, reminiscing was common to the majority of the students at least some of the time during the month prior to the interview.

Avoiding Reminders of the Deceased

Only a few respondents reported using avoidance behaviors. Two said they often kept themselves from thinking about the deceased, three said they often avoided talking about the person, and one often avoided places that reminded him of his dead girlfriend. Two persons said they sometimes avoided doing things that brought back memories of the dead person. In short, only a small number of students practiced avoidance behaviors.

Emotions

The feelings that predominated during the past month were sadness (n = 17), loneliness (n = 16), and a feeling of comfort (n = 15). Fear (n = 11) was reported to a somewhat lesser extent. Only three persons reported feeling a sense of confidence during the past month. Whereas a majority (n = 10) said that they had not felt angry about the death during the past month,

three other students said they had felt angry very much: two were in their first year of bereavement and one several years past the death.[2] Other emotions reported by some students as having occurred very much during the past month were: loneliness (n = 6), sadness (n = 5), and fear (n = 4).

Expectations about Grief Recovery

The students on the whole said recovery from grief had proved harder than they had expected, they had felt sadder than they had expected, and the time to recover had taken longer than expected. In contrast to their expectations and personal experiences with grief, the students perceived their friends had expected the interviewees' recovery would come easier, be less sad, and take less time; whereas, they said family members -- on the whole -- had not placed expectations on them.

Means Used to Cope

The practices mentioned as helpful by most persons (nine or more) were remembering good things about the deceased (n = 13), engaging in religious practices (n = 11), crying, keeping busy, and talking about the death (n = 10 for all), and thinking the person is better off because he/she is dead (n = 9). No coping practice was mentioned as distressing by even one-third of the students: not thinking about the death was distressing to four

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[2]Grouping students into two categories of time since the death (1st year, more than 1st year) and running chi-square tests on emotions during the past month produced significant differences only in terms of anger, $X^2 = 6.78$, 2df, $p < .04$.

persons; other distressing practices mentioned were working on grief by oneself (n = 3), talking about the death (n = 3), and professional help (n = 3). Two practices were reported as both distressing and helpful by at least one-third of the interviewees: keeping belongings of the deceased (n = 7) and working on grief by oneself (n = 6). Five students had sought professional help for their grief, and only one reported the experience had been helpful. Two students had taken medication prescribed by doctors for their grief: one said the medication had been a help, and the other remembered with a shudder the medication as "very distressing because it stopped me from feeling."

The students overwhelmingly gave a free response answer to the question, "What would indicate your grief recovery has taken place?" In one form or another they said, "When I can think or talk about the death without getting upset."

Discussion

Limitations of these studies bear mentioning. The interviews were conducted with 18 volunteers using a cross-sectional design. The natural grouping of the 18 students in terms of time since the deaths is curious: the majority in their first 12 months of bereavement, none in the second year, and the rest three or more years beyond the death. At best, broadly suggestive ideas will attend such widely dispersed as well as such closely compacted cross-sections of the moment since grief began.

One would suspect that there are too few students in the interview sample to produce group contrasts detectable by statistical analysis; further, any differences that do emerge could just as well be the result of a skewed sample. However, as a snapshot of one point in time, the interviews provide a glimpse of the bereavement in the students' lives.

Neither the interviews nor the surveys provide any knowledge about the trajectory of grief in the lives of college students. They do not give any means to test changes in grief over time. The plea of bereavement researchers for longitudinal studies needs to be raised again. Some efforts along these lines are now taking shape on the K-State campus thanks to a two year grant from the Prevention Research Branch of NIMH to study social support and bereaved college students.

The survey used cross-sectional methodology also, but has stronger claims than the interview study to being representative of the undergraduate population on the K-State campus. Having replicated the survey twice, I am confident that the survey produced trustworthy information about the many topics investigated. What surprised many persons on the campus was the prevalence of recent deaths for the student body to deal with: of the 447 students who reported a family member's death, 122 (27.4%) said the death had occurred within the past year; and of the 334 students who reported a friend's death, 146 (43.7%) said the death had occurred within the past year. The data about death

and grief on college campuses (LaGrand, 1981; Wrenn, 1989) are borne out by the survey figures from our campus. Bereavement is present in a significant portion of the student body at K-State at any moment in time.

Let's focus on certain aspects of the visage bereavement takes in these students' lives. One is the countenance of religion, which possesses meaning for the students and provides them a means of coping in the face of grief. However, except for some pastoral theologians and counselors -- and some death educators -- the role of religion primarily has been ignored in recovering from loss and coping with life crises (Balk, 1983, in press; Lewis, 1961; Pargament, 1988; Rando, 1988).

It is clear that many students experienced religion (as well as crying and talking to someone about the death) to be more reliable and helpful than they did professional sources of help. The religious aspects of these students' lives is representative of undergraduates in our midwestern land-grant university. No claims are being made for students on other campuses, although LaGrand (1981, 1986) reported on the coping value attributed to religion by grieving undergraduates in his survey of New York students.

One wonders what would be the outcome for grieving students seeking professional help were the professionals open to discussing the value of religion for the students. While I am not asserting that counselors must inject a religious element

into their sessions with clients, I do claim that it is incumbent upon professionals to be aware of what frames meaning in their client's world (Egan, 1990). I suspect that professionals uncomfortable with religion in counseling sessions miss a remarkable opportunity to enter the world of some students and assist them in their bereavement.

We do not know what type of contact the five students had with professional helpers. Nor do we know what their expectations were of the professionals. The contact may have been of the highest professional integrity and marred by unrealistic expectations on the part of the students. However, another possibility is that these five professionals had inadequate preparation to work with bereaved adolescents. While this hypothesis is harsh, it is grounded in personal experience with some counselors and other clinicians. Can we assume that the students had unrealistic expectations of what a professional could accomplish with their grief? Perhaps it is more the case that both the students and the professionals were working from ignorance about what to expect during bereavement.

A commonly held rule of thumb is that talking about one's grief is a useful means to come to terms with one's grief. The responses of the students surveyed suggest this rule of thumb applied on the whole to them. Whom the students sought to talk with varied according to whose death was to be discussed: close friends and mothers were preferred when a friend had died,

mothers when there had been a family death. Fathers and close friends were preferred by similar numbers when a family member's death needed discussing.

For the 18 students I interviewed, the majority said talking about the death had proved helpful. However, they also indicated that most persons around them seemed disinterested or uncomfortable when the death was mentioned. Thus, opportunities for talking were limited.

According to the students' testimony, their expectations about recovering from grief changed dramatically once their grief work began. Nearly all found grief to be harder, to last longer, and to leave them feeling sadder than they had anticipated. Peers' expectations were perceived to be out of synch with what the interviewees experienced, whereas family members (many who presumably were grieving also) did not place expectations on them. There seems a link between these data and what Silver & Wortman (1980) have said: outsiders seldom appreciate the intensity and duration of grief reactions.

Avoiding thoughts and feelings associated with the death were uncommon reactions. Whereas they find non-affected peers prefer to avoid the topic of their grief, the bereaved students did not see avoidance as desirable, helpful, or in fact possible. Although students surveyed by Vickio et al (1990) identified attentive listening and presence as the most helpful actions outsiders to grief can take with the bereaved, it was more common

for the students I surveyed to indicate their peers preferred to avoid them and/or the topic of their grief.

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Table 1

The Meaning of Death for College Students

Category	n	%
Beginning of a life after death	214	38.4
Termination of this life but survival of the spirit	188	33.8
Endless sleep	43	7.7
Don't know	40	7.2
The end, the final process of life	30	5.4
Joining with universal cosmic consciousness	16	2.9
Other	22	3.9
Data missing	4	0.7
Total	557	100.0

Table 2

Frequency of Thoughts about Own Death

Category	n	%
Very Frequently	7	1.3
Frequently	68	12.2
Occasionally	342	61.4
Rarely	108	19.4
Never	31	5.6
Data Missing	1	0.1
Total	557	100.0

Table 3

Deaths in Families of the College Students

Relative Who Died	n	%[a]
Mother	12	2.7
Father	30	6.7
Sister	7	1.6
Brother	17	3.8
Grandparent	376	84.1
Other	147	32.8

[a]Based on the 447 students who reported a death in the family. In 124 cases multiple deaths were reported.

Table 4

Persons Chosen to Discuss the Death of a Family Member and of a Friend

	Death of a Family Member (n = 447)		Death of a Friend (n = 334)	
Persons Chosen	n	%	n	%
Mothers	368	82.7	204	61.4
Fathers	260	58.4	117	35.2
Sisters	181	40.7	77	23.1
Brothers	170	38.2	67	20.1
Close Friends	256	57.5	290	87.1
Ministers	41	9.2	20	6.0
Counselors	22	4.9	30	9.0
Others	130	29.3	62	18.6
Nobody	30	6.7	14	4.2